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Ancient Seals of the Near East

BY

RICHARD A. MARTIN

CURATOR OF NEAR EASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY



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CYLINDER AND STAMP SEALS

Cylinder seals: No. 1. Early Dynastic; basalt. No. 2. Jemdet Nasr; marble. No. 3. Early Dynastic; shell. No. 4. Agade; basalt. No. 5. Babylonian; hematite. No. 6. Neo-Babylonian (modern impression); carnelian. *Stamp seals:* No. 7. Neo-Babylonian; quartz. No. 8. Sasanid; chalcedony. No. 9. Sasanid; carnelian.

Actual size

FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

CHICAGO, 1940

LEAFLET NUMBER 34

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Ancient Seals of the Near East

The cylinder seal is the major contribution of Mesopotamia to glyptic art. Cylinders originated during the Uruk period in the fourth millennium B.C., and were used for more than three thousand years by the peoples of the Near East.

Cylinder seals are engraved in intaglio on the curved surface. Both before and after the invention of writing, they were utilized for many types of sealing purposes. The shapes of the cylinders, varying slightly during different periods, were well adapted for making impressions on all sorts of irregular clay surfaces. Moist clay plastered about the cover of a jar and rolled over by a seal would prevent any tampering with the contents of the jar without destruction of the owner's seal impression. An impression on a lump of clay placed over the knot of a cord would protect merchandise tied in a bundle. A dab of impressed clay on an object would label its ownership. The earliest written documents bear seal impressions. Business transactions written on clay tablets were legalized by the seal impressions of witnesses, and state letters were authenticated by the seals of officials.

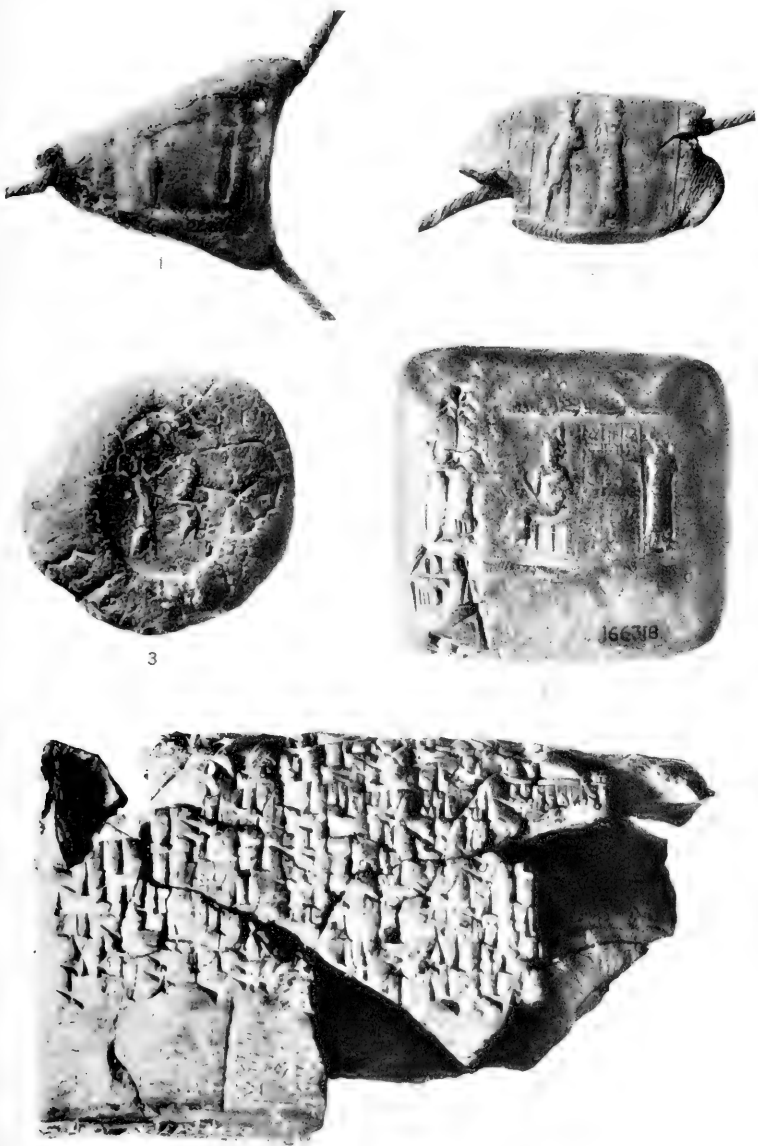
Stone of all kinds, usually of the harder varieties, was the most generally used material for the cylinders, but during the Early Dynastic period seals were often cut from the cores of spider shells from the Persian Gulf. Copper and bronze gravers and the bow-drill were the tools of the early seal-cutter. Later he added to these a small revolving disk. The cylinders were usually

perforated lengthwise so that they could be worn either attached to a pin or suspended from a cord about the neck or wrist.

The seals depict nearly all phases of the life of the times, with emphasis on the mythological. Inscriptions first appear on cylinders in the Early Dynastic period and consist only of the name of the owner. Later the seals were dedicated by the owner to the king or a god, the inscriptions reaching their greatest length during the Kassite period with prayers to the gods. The cuneiform characters were cut in reverse so that they could be read from the impression.

Although in later Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian times stamp seals began to replace cylinders, it was not until after the fall of the Persian Empire in 331 B.C. that the cylinder seal died out. Stamp seals were engraved only on the base. They were made of the same materials that were used for cylinders, and the engraving technique was similar. The stamp, like the cylinder, could be used on clay, but it was better suited than the cylinder for use on the newer writing materials that gradually displaced the clay tablet. Stamp seals are still in use, but the pictorial seal of the Near East died out with the Arab conquest in A.D. 637.

The seal impressions illustrated in the following pages represent some of the finest examples of the major periods in Near Eastern glyptic art. These photographs are from reproductions in the frieze of the Babylonian Hall (Hall K), in which the impressions have been enlarged approximately twenty-five times.



ANCIENT IMPRESSIONS OF SEALS

Nos. 1 and 2. Babylonian; impressions of cylinder seals on clay. No. 3. Neo-Babylonian; stamp on asphalt jar-stopper. No. 4. Third Dynasty Ur; clay "receipt" bearing cylinder-seal impression of a man named Gududu. No. 5. Babylonian; showing cylinder-seal impressions of witnesses to a real estate transaction.

Actual size



No. 1

JEMDET NASR

Circa 3200 B.C.

Long-horned antelopes running in file.

Animal files are characteristic of the early glyptic art during this and the preceding Uruk period, when writing began in Babylonia.



Two human figures wearing long goatskin or sheepskin garments are seated facing each other. One sits on a stool and the other on a short-backed chair. Between them, on a tripod stand, is a large jar from which protrude four drinking-tubes. At the end is a scorpion.

This is a ceremonial beer-drinking scene. Copper "straws" such as the four illustrated in this seal have been excavated in Babylonia. At the lower end of these tubes are many small perforations which served as a strainer for keeping the barley chaff from entering the tube.



The seal is inscribed with the name of the owner, I-lum-Sag(?)—ir, a Semite, and illustrates a scene from the earlier portion of the Gilgamesh Epic.

Gilgamesh is in a protective attitude, with his arms about two rampant animals, a goat at left and a bull at right. A lion is attacking the bull. Enkidu grasps the lion's tail and attacks him with a spear. A goat and two small rampant bulls frisk in safety about the legs of Enkidu.

Gilgamesh, long considered a legendary figure, is now known to be an actual historical character—King of Uruk in the Early Dynastic period. The Epic of Gilgamesh developed some time after his death, and he became two-thirds god and one-third man. The Babylonian story, recorded on twelve tablets, describes in detail the wanderings of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu, half-man and half-beast, and their fights with mythical animals in the attempt to bring safety to mankind. After the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh sought counsel of the sole survivor of the deluge in hope of learning from him the secret of eternal life. To Gilgamesh the survivor related the story of the flood—the story that appears later in Genesis—and told him how to find a plant which when eaten would give eternal life. Also, he told Gilgamesh that by dying he could attain immortality. Gilgamesh found the plant of eternal life, but on his return journey it was stolen and devoured by a serpent—thus explaining the yearly renewal of the skin of snakes. The Epic of Gilgamesh ends with an account of how man after death becomes immortal and receives his just rewards and punishments in the afterworld.



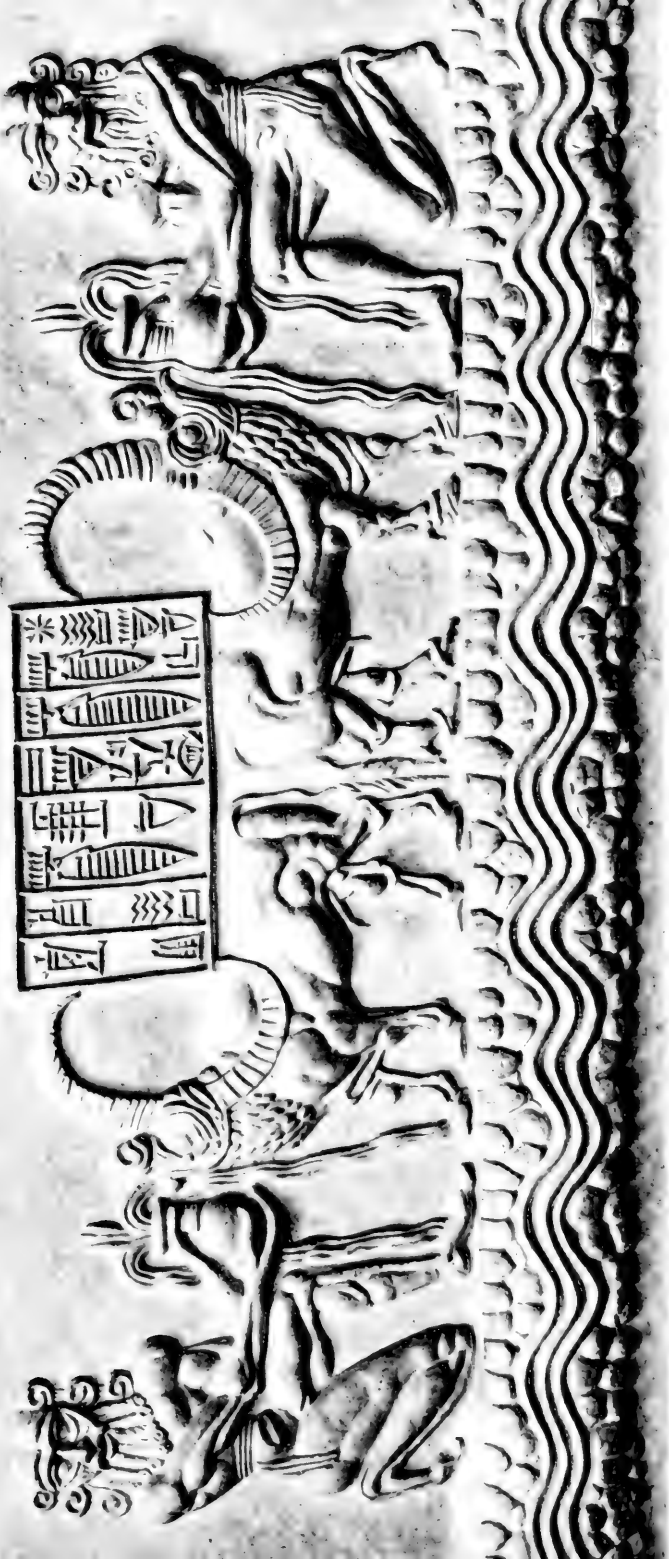
No. 4

HARAPPA

Circa 2500 B.C.

An elephant and a rhinoceros in file. Above the rhinoceros is a crocodile.

This seal, though found in Babylonia, is so similar in style to the glyptic art known from the excavations at Mohenjo-Daro that it is undoubtedly an import piece from the Indus Valley.



Seal dedicated to Shar-kali-sharri (2412-2389 B.C.), fifth king of the dynasty of Akkad, by his private secretary, Ibni-sharrum, the owner of the seal. It shows Gilgamesh and Gudama, the bull of heaven (constellation Taurus), pictured as the wild bull. Gilgamesh is holding a jar overflowing with the waters of eternal life, from the center of which springs the plant of life. Typical for representations of Gilgamesh is the curling at the ends of the hair and beard. The wavy lines and circles at the base are the symbols for water and mountains.

The art of the seal reached its highest expression in the Agade period. The writing, though already with wedge form, still retains some of its pictorial character, evident in the star, the symbol of a god, in the upper right corner, and the thrice-repeated sign for king, a man with a feather crown.

INSCRIPTION

dŠar-kà-lí-šàr-ri
 šàr
A-ga-dêki
Ib-ni-šarrum
īupšarrum
warad-ka

Shar-kali-sharri,
 king
 of Akkad,
 Ibni-sharrum,
 the scribe,
 thy servant

五	米	國	金	部	全	一	金
五	米	國	金	部	全	一	金
五	米	國	金	部	全	一	金
五	米	國	金	部	全	一	金



五	米	國	金	部	全	一	金
五	米	國	金	部	全	一	金
五	米	國	金	部	全	一	金
五	米	國	金	部	全	一	金

Seal dedicated to Ur-Nammu (2290-2273 B.C.), first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, by Hashhamer, governor of the province of Ishkun-Sin.

The deified king, seated on a throne, is approached by a goddess leading Hashhamer by the hand, followed by another goddess. The king has a long, square beard. He wears a turban-like royal cap, and on his outstretched arm is a bracelet. The back leg of the throne is formed in the shape of the hind leg of a bull. The three approaching figures have their hands raised in supplication. Both goddesses have elaborate coiffures and wear the simple horned head-dress. All the figures are dressed in long robes with their right shoulders bare: the king in a simple garment with bands at the bottom, the first goddess in a flounced dress, the supplicant in a fringed tunic, and the second goddess in a tightly wrapped dress with vertical ribbing.

The inscription is in the finest type of Babylonian writing.

INSCRIPTION

Ur-dnammu
ni-ta kalag-ga
lugal U-rîki-ma
Ha-dûs-ha-me-ir
ensig
Iš-ku-und-enkizu
ir-zu

(To) Ur-Nammu,
 the mighty man,
 king of Ur,
 Hashhamer,
 the governor
 of Ishkun-Sin,
 thy servant

三 命 命
命 命 命
命 命 命



三 命 命
命 命 命
命 命 命

BABYLONIAN

Seal dedicated to Samsu-iluna (1904-1867 B.C.), seventh king of the First Dynasty of Babylon, by the owner, Dakiya, son of Damiq-ilishu. Damiq-ilishu was the last king of the Isin dynasty. His kingdom was destroyed by Rim Sin of Larsa, whereupon Dakiya fled for protection to the great law-giver Hammurabi. Hammurabi soon avenged the conquest of Damiq-ilishu by destroying in turn Rim Sin's kingdom. On this seal Dakiya appears as a high official under Samsu-iluna, Hammurabi's son and successor.

A god wearing a turban-like cap, a short skirt, and a mantle, and clasping a mace to his chest, is approached by a goddess wearing an elaborate horned head-dress and a long, flounced garment. Both her hands are raised in supplication.

INSCRIPTION

Da-ki-i-a
mâr Da-mi-iq-i-lî-šu
warad Sa-am-su-i-lu-na

Dakiya,
 the son of Damiq-ilishu,
 the servant of [the king]
 Samsu-iluna

人 之 心 也

人 之 心 也

人 之 心 也



人 之 心 也

人 之 心 也

人 之 心 也

No. 8

NUZI

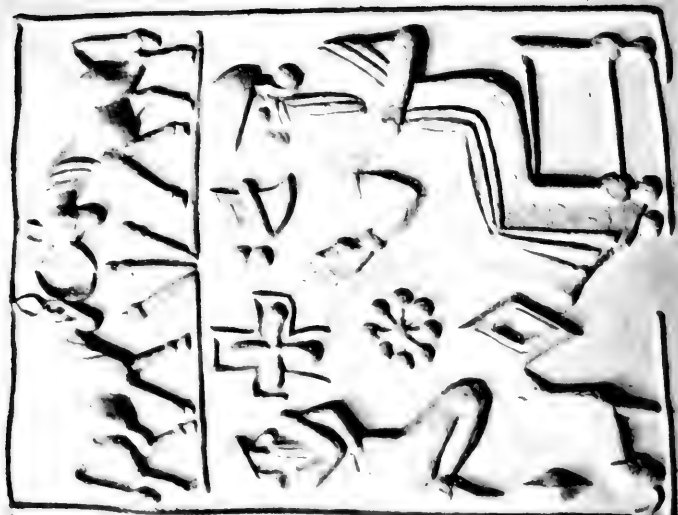
15th Century B.C.

Seal impression on a letter of Saushshattar, son of Parsashatar, King of Mitanni, to Itkhiya. This impression dates a very important collection of several thousand tablets, the business archives for five generations of the most important families in Nuzi. Also, it shows that the territory around Nuzi, east of the Tigris, was in the possession of the kings of Mitanni.

INSCRIPTION

Sa-uš-ša-al-tar
mār Pār-sa-ša-tar
šār Ma-i-ta-ni

Saushshattar,
son of Parsashatar,
king of Mitanni



一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十

一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十

一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十

一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十

一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十

一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十



Seal dedicated to the Kassite king, Burnaburiash II (1369–1345 B.C.), by the owner, Kidin-Marduk, son of Sha-ilima-damqa, a high official.

A god is seated on a throne, clad in a loosely draped gown and a turban-like cap, with a bracelet on his outstretched arm. Before him a nude man (ceremonial nudity) is kneeling; and below the man a dog sits in adoration of the god. In the field are a Kassite cross, characteristic symbol of the period; a rosette; two lozenges; and two unknown symbols. Above are two fighting bulls.

INSCRIPTION

Ki-din-aMarduk
dumu Ša-ili-ma-dam-qá
lú-sag
Bur-ra-bu-ri-ia-aš
lugal ki-šár-ra
en-ti-la he-nir-gál

Kidin-Marduk,
 son of Sha-ilima-damqa,
 high officer of
 Burnaburiash,
 the king of the universe,
 the lord of life, may he be strong



No. 10

HITTITE EMPIRE

14th Century B.C.

Four Gilgamesh figures in a wheel, encircled by a guilloche. Each figure holds a vase in one hand and grasps the wrist of the preceding figure with the other. Above the guilloche band are a seated lion and a winged sphinx; below are two fighting bulls with vultures on their backs.



An Assyrian archer, standing with drawn bow in a two-wheeled, horse-drawn chariot, is attacking a foot-soldier who is also about to release an arrow. The riding warrior has a one-piece bow, while that of the foot-soldier is undoubtedly a composite bow. The reins are draped loosely about the body of the charioteer during the battle charge, leaving the hands free for the shot. A globular standard is mounted on the rear of the chariot. Below the horse is the body of a vanquished enemy. In the field at the upper center is a seven-pointed star; above the horse's head, a crescent; and above the foot-soldier, a globe.

The primitive technique used here, so characteristic of this period in Assyrian glyptic art, is excellent for depicting vigorous action. Contrast the movement in this scene with the stilted action of the hunt pictured on the Achaemenid seal (No. 15).

新刊三才圖會
卷之二十一
雜考



新刊三才圖會
卷之二十一
雜考

Seal dedicated to the goddess Kubaba, the mother-goddess of North Syria, by Matrunna, the daughter of Aplahanda, King of Carchemish.

Two figures, a god and a goddess, stand facing each other. The god wears a short undergarment, a long, fringed coat, and a helmet. The goddess is clad in a flounced dress, and wears a turban with ribbons dangling behind. Between them are a crouching monkey, a fish, and a winged sun-disk.

This seal is a Phoenician adaptation of the style of the First Babylonian Dynasty. Carchemish was on the main route between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean, and was an important center for the distribution of horses.

INSCRIPTION

Ma-at-ru-un-na
duma-sal Ap-la-ha-an-da
geme dKu-ba-ba

Matrunna,
 the daughter of Aplahanda,
 the servant girl
 of the goddess Kubaba



At the left is a goddess wearing a peculiar head-dress and a long garment tightly girded below the hips and ruffled out at bottom. In one hand she holds an object shaped like a palm frond. She is approached by a king who wears a high, conical crown, a short skirt, and a mantle. He holds a curved trumpet to his chest. Behind him is a small, inverted dagger. Between two guilloches appear three retainers, kneeling or half-kneeling in adoration, all of them wearing short, tightly wrapped waist-cloths. The first and third carry crooks, and the second a lance.



This is a ceremonial scene. A worshiper (center) is facing Marduk, god of Babylon, with Nabu, god of Borsippa and patron of writing, behind him. The worshiper is beardless; he is dressed in a turban and a long, fringed garment, and wears a bracelet on the left arm. The position of the fingers indicates adoration. Each god is standing on a platform placed on the back of a sacred dragon. The dragons are lying on low stands, in front of which rise the emblems of both gods—the spade of Marduk, and the double stylus of Nabu. Both gods are bearded, and both wear a cylindrical head-dress ornamented with horns and surmounted by a globe. Marduk is garbed in a kilt and mantle, and Nabu in a long garment. Each has a bow and quiver. Marduk is holding his sceptre, and Nabu a tablet. At the end, in the form of a standard, is the tree of life. In the field are a crescent moon, the star of Ishtar (Venus), seven small globes (the Pleiades), and the winged sun-disk.



No. 15

ACHAEMENID

6th-5th Century B.C.

A king and his driver are riding in a two-wheeled chariot drawn by two asses. The king, his outer garment tucked up under the belt, wears the war crown. He is shooting an arrow at a mythical horned monster under the protection of the sun-disk, Ahura Mazda. The chariot has a leather-covered box, a strap at the back to be used in mounting, and large nails in the rim of the wheel to strengthen the tire.



This seal, dedicated to Marduk, illustrates a phase in the Babylonian Epic of Creation.

Marduk, king of the gods, the winged human figure with long sickle-sword, is shown in combat with the chaos monster Tiamat, here represented as a mythical animal, half-bird, half-lion. Tiamat is the biblical Tehom, the deep, or abyss, of Genesis. At the end is the tree of life.

The Epic of Creation, which so influenced later Semitic theological views, was probably written by the priests during the First Dynasty of Babylon (2049-1740 B.C.) to glorify the local god Marduk. The concept itself is much older. The epic originally consisted of six books, or tablets, and is well known through later Assyrian and Babylonian texts.

In the beginning, the legend states, only two beings existed, Apsu and Tiamat, the male and female principles of the seas. From them sprang the gods, who attempted to form an orderly universe. One of them, Ea, defeated Apsu and became the fresh-water god. To destroy these gods who attempted to bring order out of chaos, Tiamat created eleven monsters, led by her consort Kingu. In the ensuing battle both Anu, the heaven god, and Ea fled, leaving only Marduk, son of Ea, to battle with Tiamat and her followers. Marduk, victorious, chained the eleven monsters to the stars, which were later identified with various constellations. Then he divided the body of Tiamat, half to form the canopy of heaven, and half to form the earth. After Marduk had arranged the movement of the planets in orderly fashion, Ea assigned the other gods to their respective duties, and created man from the blood of the dead Kingu.

The inscription on this seal was meant to be read directly from the cylinder, and when rolled, as in this case, it is in reverse and is read by the aid of a mirror, as one reads the writing on a blotter.

INSCRIPTION

*dMarduk nâšîr napîšîti
balâta qîšaâ*

Marduk, protector of soul,
give [me] life



The royal seal of Artaxerxes I, King of Persia (465-424 B.C.). Artaxerxes is shown killing the rebel king of Egypt, Inarus. The four captives, led by a rope about their necks and with hands bound behind them, probably represent the Greek generals from Athens who aided Inarus and were put to death with him. Artaxerxes wears a long tunic, sandals, and the war crown, and carries on his back a bow and a quiver full of arrows. Inarus wears the feather crown of Egypt. At the end is a palm tree.

Inarus held a minor kingship of the Lybians in upper Egypt. Hearing that the Persian armies were engaged in stamping out trouble on their eastern frontier, he started a revolt which soon involved the whole of Egypt. Inarus asked the support of Athens, and Pericles, fearing the capture by Artaxerxes of certain cities in Asia Minor then paying taxes to Athens, and wishing to insure another source of grain, formed an alliance with Egypt and dispatched a fleet to aid her. The Persians, with the assistance of the Phoenician fleet, defeated Athens, and the eastern Mediterranean became a Persian sea. Inarus surrendered on a guaranty of personal safety, and the revolt ended. However, after a few years of insistent demands by the Persian queen-mother Amestris for punishment of Inarus, he was impaled and fifty Greeks were beheaded.



HITTITE

No. 18

11th Century B.C.

This is a royal, bilingual stamp seal. In the center stands the king holding his staff of office. About him is an inscription in Hittite hieroglyphics. On the periphery of the seal the same inscription is repeated in cuneiform.

INSCRIPTION

CUNEIFORM: *mTar-qu-u-tim-me*
šar mât ál Me-ra+a

Tarquṭimme the king
of the land Mera

HIEROGLYPHIC: *Tarḫu-ṭhi Me+ra-e*
land king

Tarḫuthi the king
of the land Mera



NEO-BABYLONIAN

No. 19

6th Century B.C.

A bearded priest, conventionalized, wearing a long garment, stands before an altar on which is the spade symbol of Marduk and the stylus symbol of Nabu.



ACHAEMENID

No. 20

5th Century B.C.

This seal shows a charging lion above a wild boar.



PARTHIAN

No. 21

2nd Century B.C.

Portrait of Mithradates I (171-138 B.C.), probably
done by a Greek artist.



SASANID

No. 22

3rd-4th Century A.D.

A long-horned antelope in repose. Above its tail is a six-pointed star, and before it are three lines indicating grass.

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1. National Museum, Baghdad.
2. Oriental Institute, Chicago.
3. National Museum, Baghdad.
4. National Museum, Baghdad.
5. Collection de Clercq, Paris.
6. British Museum, London.
7. University of Illinois, Urbana.
8. Harvard Semitic Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
9. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.
10. Mr. Edward T. Newell, American Numismatic Society, New York.
11. Collection de Clercq, Paris.
12. Mrs. William H. Moore, New York.
13. Mr. Edward T. Newell, American Numismatic Society, New York.
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15. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
16. Mrs. Agnes Brett, New York.
17. Hermitage Museum, Leningrad.
18. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.
19. Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.
20. Oriental Institute, Chicago.
21. Hertzoglichen Museum, Gotha, Germany.
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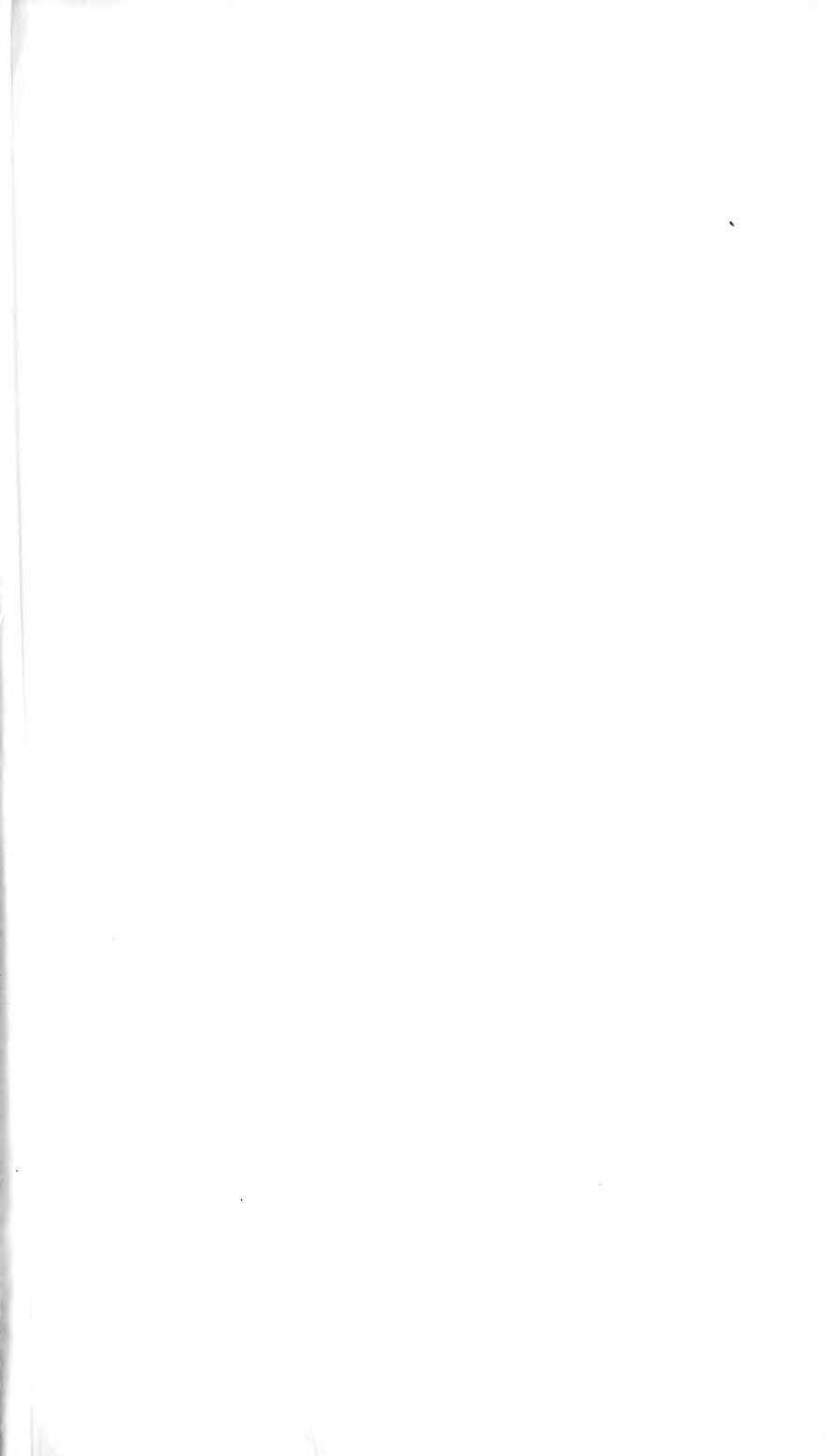
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